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Acting for Aesthetic Reasons

Abstract

It seems natural to think that there are aesthetic reasons for action and that an artist must be guided by such reasons as he or she sets about her canvas or poem or symphony or marble. This latter supposition seems at odds, however, not only with classical inspiration theory but also with the views of one of the last century's most important philosophers of art, R.G. Collingwood. We propose an account of acting for an aesthetic reason inspired by G.E.M. Anscombe's *Intention*, and specifically by her concept of 'practical knowledge', that we believe can accommodate Collingwood's reservations about the sort of knowledge of their ends, and of the means to those ends, that artists have as they engage in their creative activity.

1. Aesthetic Reasons

It seems natural to think that there are aesthetic reasons for action. That such-and-such would be beautiful, for instance, looks like a reason to bring that result about; that it would be ugly, a reason to avert it. An artist, it seems natural to suppose, must be guided by such reasons as he or she sets about her canvas or poem or symphony or marble, doing this rather than that in light of an indefinitely broad array of aesthetic reasons for or against particular courses of action. This latter supposition seems at odds, however, not only with classical inspiration theory – the artist is breathed into by the gods; he or she acts not for reasons, but as if possessed¹ – but also with an appealing view powerfully articulated by one of the last century's most important philosophers of art, R.G. Collingwood.

Collingwood has no quarrel with the idea that there *are* aesthetic reasons for action. For example, that such-and-such an artwork is beautiful or ugly may be a reason for a critic to write a positive or negative review of it. What he does appear to deny, however, is that *artists* act for such reasons as they create their art. He argues that when an artist sets out to create art, he or she cannot know what the result will be like. 'There is certainly here a directed process,' he says: 'an effort, that is, directed upon a certain end; but the end is not something foreseen and preconceived, to which an appropriate means can be thought in the light of our knowledge of its special character' – since knowledge of that special character is precisely the end at which artistic activity aims.² He allows that means-end reasoning *can* feature in artistic activity – but at a subsidiary level.³ Paint-brushes and chisels are means to the end of paintings and sculptures, for instance, and technical accomplishment in their use is

¹ See, e.g., Plato, *Ion*.

² R.G Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p.111.

³ *ibid.*, pp.20,29.

indispensable to the creation of paintings or sculptures likely to be even minimally worthwhile.⁴ But arriving at a *good* painting or sculpture cannot be understood in these terms alone: successful artistry, as he puts it, ‘is an activity of which there can be no technique’.⁵ Rather, he suggests, we must feel our way. We say to ourselves ‘This line won’t do’, until we have got it right.⁶ We can give no prior specification of what the right line will be; but when we’ve got it, we know. ‘That’s what I was after!’ we might say. If the eventual goal is obscure to the artist in this way, however, it is hard to see how acting for aesthetic reasons could account for that goal’s ever being reached. Rather, it seems, the artist must be understood as simply taking a shot in the dark – and hoping for the best.⁷

Our view, by contrast, is not only that there are such things as aesthetic reasons for action, but that successful artists act in light of them.^{8,9} Nor, we think, does Collingwood – correctly interpreted – give us grounds to think otherwise.¹⁰ In order to see why this is so, however, we need to take a step back and ask: what is it to act for a reason?

2. Acting for a reason

In this section we review two influential answers to our question, one offered by Donald Davidson, the other by Elizabeth Anscombe.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.26.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.111. What Collingwood actually says is: ‘Expression is an activity of which there can be no technique’ – where expression, for him, is the clarification of a thought or feeling (*ibid.*). But since a successful expression, in his view, just *is* a successful work of art, his claim translates into the one that we report in the main text, above.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.283.

⁷ Frank Sibley – another of the twentieth century’s most important aestheticians – appears to encourage the same conclusion from a different direction. According to him, non-aesthetic properties (colour, volume, etc.) radically underdetermine local aesthetic properties (vividness in the corner of a canvas, for instance; the thrill of a *tutti* climax) while local aesthetic properties radically underdetermine global aesthetic properties (the overall elegance of a painting, for example, or the overall power of a symphony) (‘General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics’, in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfearn and Jeremy Roxbee Cox [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001: 1-20].) If so, it would seem that an artist’s choosing this colour rather than that because the local result would be vivid, say, or choosing to combine local vividness with local grace because the global result would be elegant, say, cannot, strictly, be understood as his or her acting for aesthetic reasons, since there are no good grounds to suppose that the relevant choices have a bearing on the results achieved. Again, then, it seems that the artist is best thought of as simply taking a punt. In what follows, we don’t address Sibley’s claims directly: Collingwood’s allow us to make the points that we want to make more economically. But we do believe that those points apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Sibley’s claims as well. (See note 32, below, for more on this.)

⁸ For an excellent discussion that takes up some very different issues from those explored here, see Berys Gaut, ‘Creativity and Rationality’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 259-270.

⁹ This claim may require qualification in some contexts, as, for example, when an artist’s motivations are not primarily aesthetic (for instance, this may be so in the creation of conceptual art – at least on some accounts of conceptual art; and it may perhaps be the case when an artist produces hack-work in the hope, e.g., of an easy sale). For present purposes, however, we restrict our discussion to those cases – surely central – in which an artist does set out to realize aesthetic ambitions of one sort or another.

¹⁰ Actually, a full interpretation of Collingwood would require much that we do not offer here, not least since Collingwood is sceptical about the priority of the aesthetic (of beauty, etc.) in an understanding of art and its creation, preferring instead to focus on what he calls ‘expression’ (see note 5, above). But these details – while important from an exegetical point of view – do not affect the point that we wish to make in this paper, which is that successful artistry can be understood as rational *even if* what Collingwood says about the artist’s knowledge of his or her means and ends is true.

2.1 Davidson on acting for a reason

On Davidson's view, your acting for a reason is your acting *because* you have a pro-attitude towards something and a belief that acting as you do is a way of furthering or somehow promoting the object of that pro-attitude. For instance, suppose I add spinach to the salad for the reason that spinach is rich in iron. According to Davidson, I add spinach to the salad because I have a pro-attitude (e.g. desire) towards increasing my intake of iron and a belief that adding spinach to my salad is a way of doing so. My reason for acting is specified after the 'because', which is both rational and causal: my having the pro-attitude and the related belief explain why I added spinach because they jointly both, rationalise and cause my action.¹¹

So Davidson says that, in order to do A for a reason, I need to have a belief – but only a belief – about how to achieve an end I desire: roughly, I need to believe that doing A is (at least probably) a means of doing B, what I desire. If I then do A believing that it will result in my doing B, and my belief and desire cause my action 'in the right way', I do A for a reason.

This account of acting for a reason does not seem to be very epistemically demanding, and thus it might appear congenial to the idea that artists often act for reasons when they engage in artistic creation, even if we accept Collingwood's strictures on the matter. For on Davidson's model, a person doesn't seem to need to know that much in order to do something for a reason. All she needs is some more or less committed belief about possible means of bringing about her end. Thus, it might seem that on Davidson's model, an artist who has no very clear views about how to achieve an end which, anyway, is not itself clearly 'foreseen or preconceived' by her, can act for the relevant reason. For she can take some means that occur to her as vaguely appropriate to an end she desires – though she lacks 'knowledge of its special character' – and if she then brings about that end, she does what she does (take the means) for a reason. For example, she suspects that modulating to a major key (she couldn't say which) may be a means to lighten the mood in some way (again, she couldn't say which), and she does so (perhaps she modulates to F major): if the mood is indeed lighter as a result, then she modulated for a reason.

But in fact this won't do. For one thing, Davidson's account is relaxed about the *degree* of epistemic commitment, as we might put it, that I need to have towards what I take to be the appropriate means to my end: I may *know* that my doing A is a means to my end, or I may only *believe* it and with different degrees of credence, or *suspect*, or *hope*, or ... that it is such a means. But the model is not so relaxed about *what* I need to know or believe, etc., in order to act for a reason. *That* must be fairly well defined; for instance, if it is by writing hard on the top sheet of paper that I am to make ten copies of what I write there, then I need to know, or believe, or ... that it is by doing *that*, and not, say by concentrating on producing beautiful handwriting, that I'm going to make the ten copies. The degree of latitude on the precise epistemic attitude that I can have towards my means does not equate to vagueness concerning what those means might be. But Collingwood's claim is, precisely, that agents often have only the vaguest sense of what their means to their obscurely grasped end might be.

¹¹ Davidson says: 'Whenever someone does something for a reason, therefore, he can be characterized as (a) having some sort of pro attitude toward actions of a certain kind, and (b) believing (or knowing, perceiving, noticing, remembering) that his action is of that kind' (D. Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons, and Causes', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 60 (1963): 685-700, p.685. He calls a pair comprised of an agent's pro-attitude and the associated belief a 'primary reason' and adds that when an agent acts for such a reason, 'the primary reason for an action is its cause' (p.686).

Second, Davidson says nothing very specific about one's grasp of the details of one's end. It is true that he denies that in order to do something intentionally I need to *know* that I am doing it. Suppose, he says, that I want to make ten copies of a letter I am about to write and believe that I can do so by using ten sheets of carbon paper. As I write firmly on the wad of paper and carbon sheets, he adds, I may not know whether I am indeed making the ten copies, nor perhaps believe that I am making them. And yet, Davidson claims, if I make ten copies I make them intentionally, and I undertake the means to making them (namely, writing hard on the wad of paper) for a reason (Davidson 1971, p. 50; see also Davidson 1978, pp. 91–4). Some authors have questioned whether this is right; surely, they contend, doing something intentionally requires *knowing how* to do it.¹² And this in turn implies that doing something intentionally requires knowing that I am doing it. We'll come back to this idea in section 3. For the moment it is enough to note that Davidson admits that, in order to do something intentionally, I need at least to know that *I am trying* to do that thing. For instance, in the example above, I need to know that I am trying to make ten carbon copies. And that implies that, in order to make the copies intentionally, I do need to know that making ten carbon copies is what *my end* is, and I need quite a clear conception of that end, of what I am trying to do. So on examination Davidson's model doesn't seem to help in accommodating Collingwood's remarks about the indefinite nature of our knowledge of our end either.

Finally, a number of authors have recently argued that acting for a reason requires knowledge of one's reason and of its connection to one's end.¹³ Accordingly, I can write hard for the reason that doing so is a way of making ten carbon copies only if I *know* that it is a way of making the copies – which of course implies that it is indeed such a means. It is only knowledge of the facts, of how things are, that enables me to act guided by those facts. If I don't know the relevant facts, the argument goes, the relationship between my acting as I did and the fact is fortuitous, a matter of luck or coincidence, and hence not sufficient for the fact to be my reason for acting.¹⁴

If this is right, then two things follow. One is that Davidson's model won't help in the task of articulating how an artist might be doing things for reasons. The other, more striking for our purposes, is that agents seem to need to *know* what their end is, and know what means they are using to that end, in order to act for that reason. And this seems to set the epistemic bar

¹² See, e.g. Roger Teichmann. *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, and Jennifer Hornsby, 'Knowledge, Belief, and Reasons for Acting', in *Explaining the Mental*, C. Penco, M. Beaney, M. Vignolo (eds.), Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, 88–105.

¹³ The view is explicitly defended by J. Hornsby 2007 and 'A Disjunctive Conception of Acting for Reasons', in *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, A. Haddock and F. MacPherson (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008: 244–261; J. Hyman, 'How Knowledge Works', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 49 (1999): 433–451 and 'Acting for Reasons: Reply to Dancy', *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 6: 3 (2011): 358–368; McDowell 'Acting in the Light of a Fact', in *Thinking About Reasons: Themes from the Philosophy of Jonathan Dancy*, D. Bakhurst, B. Hooker, and M. O. Little (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013: 13–28; Peter Unger, *Ignorance. A Case for Scepticism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 and Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 and 'Acting on Knowledge', in J.A. Carter, E. Gordon, and B. Jarvis (eds.), *Knowledge-First*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming. For a dissenting voice, see J. Dancy, 'Acting in Ignorance', *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 6(3) (2011): 345–357 and 'On Knowing One's Own Reasons', in C. Littlejohn and J. Turri (eds.), *Epistemic Norms. New Essays on Action, Belief, and Assertion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014: 81–96.

¹⁴ Some of these authors concede that there may be a use of the expression 'acting for a reason' where someone can act on the grounds of something he merely believes and which may be false. The sense is, basically, one that allows us to say that his action can be *explained* by the fact that he believed that thing, for instance, I can explain why I wrote hard on the wad of papers by saying that I believed it was the means to make copies, even if it wasn't. For a discussion, see Alvarez 2010 and 2016.

for acting for a reason even higher than it might have seemed initially. It therefore appears to make it less likely, if Collingwood is right, that artists act for reasons when they engage in creative activity.

But perhaps we shouldn't give up hope yet, for there may be another way of understanding what it is to act for a reason that can accommodate this knowledge requirement, and is at the same time more hospitable to the view that artists do what they do, when they create works of art, for reasons even if we accept Collingwood's views on the matters. So we now turn to Elizabeth Anscombe's account of what it is to act for a reason,¹⁵ and in particular to the concept of 'practical knowledge', which plays such a central role in that account.

2.2 Anscombe on acting for a reason: the concept of practical knowledge

Anscombe's project in that book is to elucidate the concepts of intention and intentional action. And she goes about doing this by means of an elucidation of the notions of a reason for acting, and of acting for a reason. She writes:

What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not? The answer that I shall suggest is that they are actions to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting (1957, 9).

This passage does little more than state that there is a connection between acting intentionally and acting for reasons – and it would be a mistake to think that she's here giving an account of what makes an action intentional in terms of what it is to act for a reason. Rather, she provides a formal way of identifying which actions are intentional actions – 'they are actions to which a certain sense of the question "Why?" is given application'; and notes that the sense at issue is that 'in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting'. However, as she adds immediately, this doesn't take us very far in an account of what it is to act intentionally and for a reason because 'the questions "What is the relevant sense of the question 'Why?'" and "What is meant by a 'reason for acting?'" are one and the same' (ibid).

At this stage it seems that the most we can say is that, according to Anscombe, I act intentionally if I act for a reason, or if I do something for no reason but I accept that the question "Why?" in the relevant sense, is pertinent: it is not 'refused application' by me, as it would be if, for example, I claimed that I didn't *know* that I was doing that thing.¹⁶

Anscombe doesn't go on to offer anything like an analysis of the concepts of intentional action or of acting for a reason – what she offers instead is a discussion of the connections among a family of concepts that throw light on the phenomenon under examination. The concepts are: knowledge, reasons, goals and intentions, practical reasoning, wanting and 'the good'.

It is in the process of elaborating on the connections among these concepts that she introduces the concept of 'practical knowledge' and of acting with such knowledge. So, what is it to act with 'practical knowledge'? That question has received much attention in recent years and we do not propose to provide a detailed exposition or defence of it here. Our purpose in exploring the notion is to cast light on the phenomenon of acting for a reason in

¹⁵ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1957.

¹⁶ 'This question is refused application by the answer: "I was not aware I was doing that"' but, as she notes, this knowledge is description-sensitive, 'so to say that a man knows he is doing X is to give a description of what he is doing under which he knows it' (Anscombe, 1957: 11-2, §6).

general and of acting for an aesthetic reason in the process of creative artistic activity in particular. The concept of practical knowledge is complex and much attention has been devoted to it recently.¹⁷ One of the most controversial features concerning the notion of practical knowledge is the idea that practical knowledge is ‘non-observational’ knowledge – by which Anscombe means that it is not based on perception, sensation or inference. Anscombe’s claim is that if you’re doing something with practical knowledge, then it is not by observation (inference, etc.) that you know what it is that you are doing. She also notes that there may be features of what you are doing that you only know by observation. But those features of your action won’t be the things you’re doing intentionally: in other words, your action won’t be intentional under the descriptions that involve features of your action known only by observation. On her view, you know what you are doing intentionally but that knowledge is not based on observation, whether of yourself or of what’s going on around you. We shall have nothing to say about that intriguing claim here and shall instead focus on two elements of her account which we believe can illuminate the question how artists can act for reasons. These are: the nature of mistakes about, and the justification of, practical knowledge.

3. Practical Knowledge and Mistakes

Anscombe introduces the concept of practical knowledge in *Intention* by drawing a distinction between speculative and practical knowledge, as follows:

Can it be that there is something that modern philosophy has blankly misunderstood: namely what ancient and medieval philosophers meant by *practical knowledge*? Certainly, in modern philosophy, we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge (p.57, §32).

Note that contrary to what the penultimate sentence of this passage may suggest, the distinction between speculative and practical knowledge is not a matter of whether there is accord between ‘what is said’ and the facts. That is, the distinction does *not* consist in the fact that in the case of speculative knowledge, what one says (or thinks) constitutes knowledge only if it is in accordance with the facts, while in the case of practical knowledge, by contrast, what one says or thinks may be knowledge even if it is not in accordance with the facts.¹⁸ For

¹⁷ For discussions see Kevin Falvey, ‘Knowledge in Intention’, *Philosophical-Studies* (2000): 21-44; Richard Moran, ‘Anscombe on ‘Practical Knowledge’’, in *Agency and Action*, J. Hyman and H. Steward, eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; and several essays in *Essays on Anscombe’s Intention*, A. Ford, J. Hornsby and F. Stoutland, eds. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2011.

¹⁸ The following passage might contribute to that misinterpretation of practical knowledge:

I wrote ‘I am a fool’ on the blackboard with my eyes shut. Now when I said what I wrote, ought I to have said: this is what I am writing, if my intention is getting executed; instead of simply: this is what I am writing?

Orders, however, can be disobeyed, and intentions fail to get executed. That intention for example would not have been executed if something had gone wrong with the chalk or the surface, so that the words did not appear. And *my knowledge would have been the same even if this had happened. If then my knowledge is independent of what actually happens*, how can it be knowledge of what does happen? Someone might say that it was a funny sort of knowledge that was still knowledge even though what it was knowledge of was not the case! On the other hand, Theophrastus’ remark holds good: the mistake is in the performance, not in the judgment (82, §45. Our italics).

consider what she says about my statement that I am opening the window, given in reply to a question about what I am doing:

I have called such a statement knowledge all along; and precisely because in such a case *what I say is true* – I do open the window (p.51, §28. Our italics).

So, in order for what one thinks or says to be knowledge, either speculative or practical, what one says or thinks must be ‘in accordance with the facts’.

The difference that she is seeking to bring out here is a matter not of accord or lack thereof between ‘what is said’ and the facts but of the *priority* that each, what is said or the facts, has for the two kinds of knowledge respectively.¹⁹ Thus, she says that in speculative knowledge, the facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge. By contrast, in practical knowledge what is said or thought – when those are expressions of intention – is prior and dictates what is to be done, and hence what the facts are to be, if it is knowledge. The phrase ‘what the facts are to be’ is central to Anscombe’s view because she takes one’s performance – one’s action – to include facts beyond one’s mental acts, and even beyond one’s bodily movements. That is why she says ‘I do what happens’. This remark, as Anscombe notes, is bound to be found ‘paradoxical and obscure’ (53, §29). We cannot elaborate in detail here but it’s sufficient to note that Anscombe uses it to reject the thought that what we do when we act on things beyond us is merely will certain things, and then that ‘internal act of will’ causally brings about a series of changes, first in my body, and then in the world. Rather, she claims, my agency consists in my changing the world. For instance, if ‘what happens’ is that a window gets opened, then *that*, i.e. opening a window, is what I do. I don’t will it to open or will my body to move in the appropriate way and leave ‘the rest up to nature’.²⁰ Thus, for Anscombe, the facts, and not just the agent’s mental states, are central to the concept of practical knowledge, though they are subordinate and determined by ‘what is thought’.

This ‘priority of thought’ in practical knowledge is captured by what she calls ‘Theophrastus’ expression’ or principle,²¹ which can be understood to say, roughly, that when there is a mistake in practical knowledge, when there is a discrepancy between what is thought or said and the facts, then

The passage is admittedly obscure and in part because some of the remarks are in the voice of an interlocutor who is sceptical or perplexed about the nature of practical knowledge (although this is not marked typographically in the original). Our suggestion as to how to interpret this passage is that Anscombe concedes that when things are not as one says (or thinks) one is *thereby* making a mistake. But her point is that in order to understand what practical knowledge is one needs to attend how the mistake ought to be corrected: *viz.*, by correcting one’s performance.

¹⁹ In contemporary philosophy, this point is often articulated using the metaphor of ‘mental states with direction of fit’ – the fit being supposedly between the (propositional) content of the mental state and the world. However, since there is no reason to think that Anscombe regarded knowledge as a mental state with propositional content, and since that metaphor is not more illuminating than the way that Anscombe herself puts the point, i.e. in terms of priority, we shan’t be using it here.

²⁰ Compare Davidson *Agency*, 60.

²¹ Here, as on p.5, §2, Anscombe is paraphrasing the 4th Century Greek work *Magna Moralia*, at 1189b 22: ‘the error, then, does not arise in the thought, but in the act [of writing]’ – ‘of writing’ because the example refers to writing. She calls this “Theophrastus’ expression” because, as she says, the work is sometimes attributed to Aristotle’s disciple Theophrastus. The *Magna Moralia* is included in the 1984 *Complete Works of Aristotle* edited by J. Barnes (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey) but as a work ‘whose authenticity has been seriously doubted’ (‘Note to the Reader’, vii.).

the mistake is not one of judgement but of performance. That is, we do *not* say: What you *said* was a mistake, because it was supposed to describe what you did and did not describe it, but: What you *did* was a mistake, because it was not in accordance with what you said (p.57, §32).

And she illustrates this point with the well-known example of the man, the detective, and the shopping list (p.56, §32). The example relates specifically to expressions of intention for future actions. But, since the knowledge we have of future intentional actions is, like the knowledge we have of our current intentional actions, also *practical* knowledge, the example helps to bring out the difference between speculative and practical knowledge in general, as captured in Theophrastus' expression.

In the example, a man with a shopping list goes about town buying the items in the list, and he is followed by a detective compiling a record of what the man buys. Anscombe asks us to regard the shopping list as an expression of intention (the man's, or more accurately, his wife's), and she notes that if, on finishing the shopping expedition,

the list and the things the man actually buys do not agree (...) then the mistake is not in the list but in the man's performance (...); whereas if the detective's record and what the man actually buys do not agree, then the mistake is in the record (*ibid.*).²²

The point about the mistake in performance is brought home with the following parenthesis:

if his wife were to say: 'Look, it says butter and you have bought margarine', he would hardly reply: 'What a mistake! we must put that right' and alter the word on the list to 'margarine' (*ibid.*).

The difference between the two kinds of knowledge that this example illustrates, then, can be summarised as follows. If what I think is not in accordance with the facts, in the case of speculative knowledge the mistake is in the judgment, whereas in the case of practical knowledge the mistake is 'in the performance'.

One might counter that in both speculative and practical cases surely the mistake is in the judgement. For, if before his wife disabuses him, the man were to say or think that he's bought everything on the list, his judgement would be false. That is right but Anscombe's point is that when the mistake is identified, the correct way to remedy it in practical cases is by changing what I do (the performance), so that it matches what I say, and not vice-versa. And this is the correct way to remedy the mistake because that's what it is to execute one's intentions. Our intentions, together with the knowledge we have of how to execute them – what means to use to our ends – therefore constitute the knowledge we have of what we're doing when we are executing them. And that practical knowledge is a standard of correctness against which to measure and modify our behaviour.

We shall come back to these considerations about mistakes below. We now want to turn to the second feature of acting with practical knowledge, which concerns justification.

4. Practical knowledge and Justification

²² The omitted passage says 'if this and this alone constitutes a *mistake*' to allow, as Anscombe explains later, for the possibility that the discrepancy between list and performance results from a different kind of mistake, e.g. of intending to do something that it is unreasonable for the agent to think he might be able, or have the opportunity, to do, given his circumstances.

The special features that characterise the justification of practical knowledge can again be introduced by contrasting speculative and practical knowledge, since they differ also in the kinds of grounds that justify each type of knowledge.

Speculative knowledge is often justified by evidence that things are as one judges them to be, for instance, by reasons one has to believe what one claims to know, or through an explanation of how one came to know what one knows.²³ Practical knowledge of what one is intentionally doing or of what one intends to do, by contrast, is justified by citing one's reasons for doing that thing.²⁴

Consider the example Wittgenstein uses, concerning the justification of future intentional actions, which clearly inspired Anscombe's discussion of these issues: 'I'm going to take two powders now, and in half an hour I shall be sick' (*PI*, §631)²⁵ – here, my claim to know that I am going to be sick in half an hour can be justified by whatever evidence I have that the powders I am going to take have that emetic effect. But my claim that I am going to take two powders now is not so justified. As Wittgenstein says:

It was not on the ground of observations of my behaviour that I said I was going to take two powders. The antecedents of this proposition were different. I mean the thoughts, actions and so on which led up to it (*PI*, 631).

This tells us how justification of the knowledge that we have of our future (or ongoing) intentional actions, which is practical, does not work. But we still need to know how it does work – i.e. *what* the justification of practical knowledge consist in.

First, the reasons that are given in justification of practical knowledge are typically given in response to the question 'Why are you doing such and such?', as when I say 'I'm resting' or 'I'm doing yoga' in answer to the question why I am lying in bed; or when I say 'I'm replenishing the water supply' or 'I'm poisoning the inhabitants of the house' in answer to the question why I am pumping water, etc. These answer to why questions are attempts to explain why I am doing those things and not, as in theoretical knowledge, to explain how I know what I know. But the explanation typically works also by way of an attempted justification: I explain and justify my actions (or attempt to do so) by giving *my reasons* for doing those things.²⁶

Why are those reasons both explanatory and justificatory? Typically, the explanation and justification of claims that express one's practical knowledge is one and the same as the explanation and justification of one's intentional action, and they consist in providing a description that gives, to use Anscombe's phrase, a 'desirability characterisation' of the action.²⁷ That characterisation connects the action to the good (that is, to value), by showing that the action is wanted because of its relation to the good, whether instrumentally, or intrinsically, i.e. as an instance of the good, at least in the agent's eyes.

²³ We leave aside the thorny question whether perceptual knowledge is rationally justified, and if so how.

²⁴ Reasons to believe that one ought to do this, that there is reason to do it: are these evidence for that belief? Yes, in the sense that they entail its truth but only because they show it would be the (or a) right thing to do.

²⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell xxx

²⁶ Is it essential that I should be able to *say* what my reason is? What if I have lost my voice, or am paralysed? Or I'm not sufficiently articulate to put it in words? See section 5 below for a brief discussion of this issue.

²⁷ *Intention*, pp.70-2, §37.

An action is instrumentally connected to the good when what one is doing is a means to an end. In such a case, what one is doing corresponds to some step in a process of means-end practical reasoning – a process that need not have been explicit (we come back to this below) – but which can be reconstructed by applying and reiterating the question: ‘Why are you ϕ -ing?’. And the answers to that question that are linked with the logic of ‘in order to’ provide the pattern of practical reasoning underpinning the action (though in reverse order). For instance: ‘I am moving my arm up and down because I am pumping (in order to pump), which I am doing because I am replenishing the water supply (in order to replenish the water supply), which I am doing because I am poisoning the inhabitants of the house (in order to poison the inhabitants of the house), etc.’ (see p.37, §23).

That is why Anscombe says, concerning Aristotle’s account of practical reasoning, that ‘the interest of the account is that it describes an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions’ (p.80, §42): this is the agent’s reasoning about how to execute his intention. And, as she points out, this is the same order that was revealed earlier in *Intention* by applying the question ‘Why?’ to what one is doing intentionally, where the answers are reasons for acting which also provide new descriptions of what one is doing, and where those descriptions form a series in which each is ‘related to the next as descriptions of means to end’ (p.46, §26).

When this desirability characterization is of something regarded by the agent as intrinsically good or valuable, the characterization refers to something that is a form of the good of human beings. Since there are different values, or as Medieval philosophers put it, *bonum est multiplex* (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, q.82, a.2) the characterization can present the action as connected to goods such as health, pleasure, friendship, beauty, the noble, etc. And only when the characterization refers to such goods will the answer put an end to the question ‘Why are you doing this?’

So the reasons I give in answer to the question ‘Why are you doing this?’ that explain and justify my action are grounded on my practical reasoning. They are therefore reasons that correspond to my means-end reasoning, or to the ultimate reason – the intrinsic desirability characterisations – for which I perform the action. And these answers to the question ‘Why are you doing that?’ express my practical knowledge of what I am doing, since I am doing that thing as a means to, or as an instantiation of, my end. In doing that, I am executing my intention and I thus know that *that*, under the relevant description, is what I am doing.

An important clarification is called for here. Anscombe’s emphasis on being able to *answer* a ‘Why?’ question and on the ability to give one’s reason may suggest that practical reasoning is always fairly explicit. But what she says is consistent with conceiving of practical reasoning as often implicit, enthymematic and generally rather inarticulate. For one can reason to a conclusion, theoretical or practical, without actually rehearsing the relevant argument in one’s mind or in any other mode or medium. Reasoning, in this minimal sense of drawing a conclusion from premises, need not be a psychological process that is fully or indeed at all explicit: one may say to oneself a word or two, or an image may flash in one’s mind, which somehow ‘contains’ a whole complex piece of practical reasoning. (This is different from the process of rehearsing a piece of reasoning: setting it out *foro interno*, or aloud, or in writing, etc., which makes the reasoning explicit and is a process that might involve linking different arguments, unfolds in time, can be interrupted, etc.)

Moreover, my action may result from practical reasoning and be something I do ‘for a reason’ even when there is no calculation about means and ends. Practical reasoning is often calculative of means: we reason, sometimes explicitly but also implicitly, or partly so, about how to achieve an end. But practical reasoning may also consist in a recognition that doing

this now is what is called for, what there is reason to do – and in doing it.²⁸

On this account, for my action to result from practical reasoning it is not necessary that there should have been any explicit reasoning: implicit reasoning and of the minimal kind just outlined is sufficient. A central criterion for whether (implicit) reasoning underpins an action on this view is the agent's ability to modify and correct her behaviour when necessary, so that it conforms to the reasons that she takes to justify her action and thus constitutes an execution of her intention. A related criterion is the ability to recognise those reasons as providing *a posteriori* explanations for her action. This is often accompanied, but need not be, by the capacity to *articulate* justifications and explanations of those actions in terms of the relevant reasons and reasoning.

To sum up. For Anscombe, when I act for a reason, I have practical knowledge of what I'm doing. This practical knowledge is the knowledge I have when I know what I'm doing intentionally and for a reason, where the reason corresponds to my practical reasoning about the matter. In such a case, (i) my intentions, together with my knowledge of how to execute them, are for me a standard of correctness, against which I measure and modify my performance; and (ii) I view my action as connected to the good, instrumentally or intrinsically: *that* is the reason, and the reasoning, that – in my eyes – justifies my actions. And that is also why the reason for which I act is, for me, a standard of correctness for my performance.

In the next section we shall explain how we can deploy this model of what it is to act for a reason, which centres on the notion of practical knowledge, to show that artists can and often do act for reasons when they create their art, while accommodating Collingwood's claims about the kind of knowledge of means and ends that he claims artists have (or lack).

5. Acting for Aesthetic Reasons

According to the idea just sketched, when I do something for a reason, I'm executing an intention to do something, and both the intention and the action that executes it are – in my eyes – justified by my reason for doing it. My reason justifies my action because it captures an aspect of the latter in which (in my eyes at least) my action is good, either intrinsically or instrumentally.

It is easy to see how this idea applies to acting for aesthetic reasons in general terms. First, the good that the artist's action will realize is aesthetic – beauty, or some other aesthetic value. And the justification will connect what the artist does to that aesthetic value: it may do so because the action is an instrumental means to that end, or because the action constitutes an instance of that aesthetic value, an end in itself.

This justification, the same as the justification of any activity by reasons, is the justification of something essentially practical, viz., the activity. This doesn't imply that what justifies the activity must itself be something practical if that is taken to mean 'of pragmatic value'. What justifies it activity is the aesthetic value that the activity realizes or sustains, either instrumentally or intrinsically. Therefore, every potential realization of some aesthetic value is, *eo ipso*, valuable. But it doesn't follow from this that every potential aesthetic value *ought* to be realized by someone. What follows, we think, is that any potential (aesthetic) value *may*

²⁸ On this view, which may go beyond Anscombe's account, practical reasoning doesn't necessarily involve deliberation about possible means to an end, and includes (implicit) reasoning that sets out what is desirable about an action.

be realized by someone who has no defeating reason not to do so; and that, sometimes, there may be conclusive reason for someone to realize an aesthetic value, and that this conclusive reason may ground an obligation to so act. These questions – *when* someone may, should, or has an obligation, and of what kind, to realise some aesthetic value – depend on the persons (natural or institutional) and circumstances of the case, since reasons are reasons for persons in certain contexts to do certain things.

Second, when an artist does this or that in the middle of the process or artistic creation, he or she will be executing an intention to bring about that aesthetic value, and will see the action as justified because it realises that aesthetic value, and in as much as it does so, instrumentally or intrinsically. As is the case in any practical domain, there is often an interplay between justification and mistakes. For, although one's practical knowledge acts as standard of correctness and success in one's aesthetic activity, the realisation that one is failing to execute one's intention may lead one to desist in the attempt to execute it, rather than to modify one's behaviour in pursuit of one's end. And this may be for a variety of reasons: because one changes one's mind about the value of the end, or about its value relative to the required means; or realises that the end is (near enough) impossible to achieve – all of which concern justification; or because of weakness of will.

So far, so good. The problem arises because, for a person to do things for reasons, and so for an artist to do anything for an aesthetic reason, she needs to be aware of the reason for which she is doing it. And this, it seems, requires that she should *know* both what end she's pursuing with her action and what means (if any) she's employing to bring about that end.

It may seem uncontroversial that sometimes artists act for aesthetic reasons in the ways just described. They know quite well what their end is and this may already be fairly defined and developed; and they may even be able to give detailed descriptions of such ends. In addition, they may know clearly what means they need to use in order to realize or refine their end: more of this, less of that, etc.: what they do corresponds to their practical reasoning about how to achieve that end. In these cases, there seems to be no problem in claiming that artists act guided by those aesthetic reasons, and they may even be able to explicitly explain and justify what they do by reference to their reasons.

But it seems also true that Collingwood is right that, sometimes, or at some points in the creative process, an artist will have only a very inchoate grasp of what his end is and no ready-made recipe or description of what means he can use to achieve that end. At most, he may be able to give only highly abstract and generic descriptions of his end; and, as for the means, perhaps he may only be capable of offering the tautologous description that he will use whatever means will realise that end. Can someone who is in such epistemic condition concerning his ends and means be said to have acted for aesthetic reasons when, after trying this and that, he finally exclaims: '*That's* what I was after!'

We want to suggest that the answer is 'Yes', because his behaviour conforms to the conception of acting for a reason based on the notion of practical knowledge outlined above.

First, this artist sets about his artistic activity in order to execute his intentions. He (as Collingwood readily admits) has technical know-how that enables him to engage with his material in successful ways. In addition, he has practical knowledge of what he is doing, as demonstrated in the fact that his grasp of his end is for him a standard of correctness for his performance: he tries now this and now that, and all along is modifying his behaviour in pursuit of a particular end. Further, his knowledge of his end is evinced in the *recognition* of it when achieved. And of course, the values that he seeks to realise, refine or sustain with this

activity and that characterise his end are aesthetic values; that is the particular nature of the justification of his creative activity.

The following problem may seem to remain. It seems possible that I should have propositional knowledge of a way in which I'm failing to achieve my end without ever having articulated my end in that precise way. And this might appear to imply that I can have propositional knowledge of the nature of my failure while lacking the corresponding propositional knowledge of my end. If so, it's hard to see, one might think, how my (practical) knowledge of my end could be a standard of correctness for my activity, given the different kinds of knowledge at play. But the problem is a mere appearance because there is no such implication. Any propositional knowledge I have of what is wrong with my performance is also, and thereby, propositional knowledge I have of (that aspect) of my end: my ability to describe my failure in those terms evinces my having such knowledge of my end, and my articulation of a way in which I am failing to achieve my end in a judgement is an expression of my knowledge of that end, and of the extent to which that knowledge is determinate – even if I had never articulated it in those terms. If the judgement that expresses the nature of the failure is abstract and vague, for instance, 'This is not quite right'; 'Or this is ugly or clumsy', etc., then one has the corresponding propositional knowledge of one's end, e.g. 'My aim is to create something good/ aesthetically pleasing/ elegant', etc.. And the same is true if the judgement that expresses the nature of the failure is more substantive and specific; if I can judge that this line is too thick or lacking in movement, then I know that about my end. All of this is consistent, however, with my knowledge of my end's failing to be anything that amounts to a detailed description of, or a recipe, or a list of instructions to achieve my end.

This conception of what it is to have practical knowledge of one's end, and of acting for a reason, depends on accepting that practical knowledge should be conceived of as an ability rather than, or not primarily as, as a mental state towards a proposition.²⁹ This is not a new suggestion.³⁰ It is, as we have seen above, implicit in Anscombe's conception of practical knowledge. A person who has practical knowledge manifests that knowledge in many ways, sometimes by expressing it propositionally. But crucially, the fundamental and most basic expression of practical knowledge is intentional behaviour that is guided towards an end which determines the behaviour. Given practical knowledge of one's end, one is able to identify mistakes in performance *as such*, and –at least in principle–³¹ to modify and guide one's behaviour accordingly, so as to make sure that what one does *is* what one knows.

This is the point about Theophrastus's principle concerning practical knowledge. So a decisive criterion for having knowledge of my end is that I treat the end as a standard against

²⁹ Stanley and Williamson introduce the idea of propositions that are known 'under practical modes of presentation' (Stanley, J. and Williamson, T. 'Knowing How', *Journal of Philosophy*, 98 (2001): 411-44). We don't want to take a stand on the plausibility of this idea but simply note that, if successful, this might be a way of understanding the sort of practical knowledge required in the context above.

³⁰ This raises a complex issue of the relation between knowledge and propositions. Some authors characterise knowledge, all knowledge, as an ability (for instance, A.R. White, *The Nature of Knowledge*, Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982; A. Kenny, *The Metaphysics of Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989; and Hyman, 1999 and 2015). Others (thinking they follow Gilbert Ryle's views in *The Concept of Mind*, London: Hutchison 1949) distinguish between two mutually exclusive types of knowledge: knowing how to do something (ability) and knowing that (propositional knowledge). We cannot examine this issue here, but help ourselves to a notion of knowledge as an ability that is manifested practically, which is the notion of knowledge that Anscombe employs in her discussion of practical knowledge.

³¹ 'At least in principle' because there may be obstacles or difficulties of various kinds in realizing one's end.

which to measure and modify what I do: only that which conforms to my reason and achieves my end, or at least approximates it, will be something that I'm willing to accept as the *correct performance*, or at any rate as a not totally hopeless one.

So what should one say about Collingwood's claim that the end that artists pursue is not 'foreseen and preconceived' and that it is not an end to which 'an appropriate means can be thought in the light of our knowledge of its special character'?

We suggest that what Collingwood says is right if one construes it to mean that one cannot provide full and detailed descriptions of what one is after, or of the means to that end. For this is often not possible for an artist: the creative process may be in one way or another inchoate or inarticulate (and not only, or necessarily, as a result of any sort of failure on the artist's part). But the same is true of other domains – which is one reason why, for instance, Aristotle holds that the good man's hitting upon the mean 'rests with perception' rather than with 'reasoning'.³² It is only if one equates knowing with the capacity expressly to state, rather than with the capacities to guide and correct, that this will strike one as wrong.³³ And, as we argued in section 4, there are no good grounds to insist on the former equation to the exclusion of the latter.

Conclusion

At first sight, it seems as if it cannot be true that artists act for aesthetic reasons as they create their art if, as Collingwood claims, the end that they pursue is not (always) 'foreseen and preconceived' and is therefore not (always) such that 'an appropriate means can be thought in the light of our knowledge of its special character'. It seems, in other words, as if artists simply stand in the wrong sort of epistemic relation to their own creative activity for that activity to be understood in terms of their acting for aesthetic reasons. We have argued, however, that this sceptical conclusion is false, on two grounds. First, the Davidsonian account of acting for reasons (on which the conclusion comes out as true) is not, for all its currency and influence, compulsory: Anscombe has offered a no less plausible account that lacks these sceptical entailments – or that lacks them, second, once it is understood that agents' practical knowledge need not receive expression in the capacity for explicit statement but may, instead, be expressed in their capacities to guide or correct their activity in light of the standard(s) of correctness and justification immanent to that activity as they conceive of it.

Maria Alvarez, Kings College London³⁴

³² *Nicomachean Ethics* II.9.

³³ Earlier we mentioned Frank Sibley (see note 7, above), suggesting that our arguments concerning Collingwood's position also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to his. This is true, however, only if we reject the strongly particularist readings of Sibley given in, e.g., Roger Scruton 1982, *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Routledge): 31-6 and Anna Bergqvist 2010, 'Why Sibley Is Not a Generalist After All', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50(1): 1-14. In our view, these readings are implausible, or at any rate uncharitable – not least because they appear to saddle Sibley with the view that artistic creativity really must be just a matter of taking shots in the dark. For a more plausible reading, which we prefer, see Claire Kirwin 2011, 'Why Sibley Is (Probably) Not a Particularist After All', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51(2): 201-212; and for relevant discussion, see Aaron Ridley 2014, 'On the Musically Possible', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54(1): 1-14.

³⁴ This paper was written during my tenure of a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship and I thank the Trust for the award of the Fellowship. We also thank Fabian Dorsch for comments on an earlier version of the paper.

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